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Narrative Career Counselling: Theory and Exemplars of Practice

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of narrative career counselling. Narrative career counselling is presented as a predominant variant of constructivism, which has relatively recently emerged as a significant force within vocational psychology and the practice of career counselling. The Systems Theory Framework and the Theory of Career Construction are introduced as metatheoretical frameworks amendable to constructivism and narrative career counselling. Whilst a stable definition of narrative career counselling cannot be presented at this stage in its theoretical and technical evolution, core theoretical tenets of this new approach to counselling are presented. Exemplars of the practice are described to provide an introductory account of the process of narrative career counselling. Some of the limitations of the approach are described along with a recommendation for the development of theory and research that adequately addresses counselling outcome and process.

Narrative Career Counselling: Theory and Exemplars of Practice

Commencing with the seminal work of Frank Parsons (1909), *Choosing a Vocation*, the traditional approaches to vocational guidance (e.g., person-environment fit) have the benefit of over a century of theory development, research, and professional application. In contrast, the constructivist approach to career development (Patton & McMahon, 2006a, 2006b) is relatively new to the profession of psychology. Within the Australian psychological literature, there has been limited coverage of the constructivist approach. In order to partially address the lack of literature, this paper presents a view of the constructivist approach to career counselling by specifically addressing a predominant form of that approach—narrative career counselling. The paper describes features of narrative career counselling and presents prototypical examples of practice.

Declaring precise definitions of the terms *constructivist*, *constructivism* and *social constructionism* is a difficult exercise (Young & Collin, 2004) and there is scope for confusion (Reid, 2006a). Within the special issue of the *Journal of Vocational Behavior* devoted to constructivism and social constructionism,Young and Collin (2004) wrote:

> [Constructivism] focuses on meaning making and the constructing of the social and psychological worlds through individual, cognitive processes while [social constructionism] emphasizes that the social and psychological worlds are made real (constructed) through social processes and interaction (p.375).

Young and Collin cautioned their readership that their simple distinction between the two was liable to overlook the variety and differences between and within both, and

then went on to provide a comprehensive analyses of the terms and their articulation within the field of career development. For the sake of convenience, this paper uses the terms constructivism and constructivist.

Though there were early signs of a constructivist turn within the field of vocational psychology (e.g., Chartrand, Strong, & Weitzman, 1995; A. Collin & Young, 1986; Richardson, 1993; Savickas, 1989a; Savickas, 1993), major reviews of the discipline's literature in the era of constructivists' emergence—the 1980s—showed little in the way of a burgeoning interest in its professional application (e.g., Gelso & Fassinger, 1990; Holland, Magoon, & Spokane, 1981; Osipow, 1987). At the emergence of constructivism within the field of career counselling, Savickas (1993) suggested that the traditional diagnostic model of vocational guidance would give way to a counselling model in which the counsellor and client worked in a collaborative relationship. This new relationship would call for less emphasis on the counsellor being the expert provider of vocational information and the interpreter vocational assessment psychometrics. There would be more emphasis upon the client being an active agent in the counselling relationship. Furthermore, Savickas asserted that career counsellors would practice within a cultural context to remove tacit barriers to individuals' development and to support their enablement in society, rather than diagnose their "occupational fit"—an approach to practice that has been brought into critical question (McIlveen & Patton, 2006). Savickas, like his contemporaries Collin and Young (1986), emphasised the meaning-making endeavour of career counselling and its association with constructivist theory.

The following section introduces two metatheoretical frameworks that can subsume constructivism and provide theoretical foundations for the narrative approach to career counselling practices.

Metatheories for Narrative Career Counselling

Systems Theory Framework

The Systems Theory Framework (Patton & McMahon, 2006a) provides a broad view of career and positions the individual, and his or her unique characteristics, amidst a overlapping systems of potential interpersonal, social and environmental influences upon career. The STF provides two services for the development of theory of career. Firstly, it broadly serves as a metatheory of career and career development practices from a range of theoretical traditions. It also serves as a vehicle to operationalise constructivist and social constructionist theories of career (McMahon & Patton, 2006a; Patton & McMahon, 2006b). It serves constructivism because of its emphasis upon the individual's own construing of his or her world. Its assumptions of process influences, particularly recursiveness, and the role of story, allude to the centrality of the individual actively construing the meaning of his or her life awash in myriad proximal and distal content influences.

The Individual System. The individual is conceived of as an active, participative, unique being and is at the centre of the STF. The individual is not defined in terms of reduced and isolated elements (e.g., abilities, traits), but as a whole, and, as a confluence of unique features. The individual system comprises the following influences: gender, values, health, sexual orientation, disability, ability, interests, beliefs, skills, personality, world-of-work knowledge, age, self-concept, physical attributes, ethnicity, and, aptitudes.

The Social System. The context system is firstly formulated in terms of the proximal social system through which the individual interacts with other people systems. The social system comprises the following influences: family, peers, community groups, education institutions, media, and, workplace.

The Environmental-Societal System. The environmental-societal system of influences consists of the following: political decisions, historical trends, employment market, geographic location, socioeconomic status, and globalisation. Though these influences are distal to the individual, they are crucial to the social construction of context.

Recursiveness. Patton and McMahon (Patton & McMahon, 1999) rejected the notion of reciprocal interaction which they used in earlier formulations of the STF (Patton & McMahon, 1997) because it implied equivalence in size and direction of relationships between influences and notions of linear causation. The STF adopts the notion recursiveness because it implies multiplicity of influences, and dynamics of nonlinearity, acausality, mutuality, and multidirectionality across past, present and future. Influences' potencies change over time and in interaction with other influences in the whole system and subsystem. Influences communicate with those positioned in other levels of an individual's system.

Change Over Time. Change, or more accurately, discontinuous change, is as inherent to the STF as it is to any person's career. Furthermore, the notion of nonlinearity supports the social constructionist challenge to stage-based career milestones, which can be perceived as social created and mediated expectations (Sugarman, 1996). Over time each influence will change intrinsically and interactively.

Chance. The use of chance captures the unpredictability of influences within the systems and events within a person life and has been formulated as a source for naturally occurring chaos with a person's career and life (e.g., Bloch, 2005; Pryor & Bright, 2003).

Theory of Career Construction

Despite his emphasis upon developmental tasks, Savickas (2005) nevertheless clearly stamped his Theory of Career Construction with the hallmark of constructivisms in the leading sentence: “The theory of career construction explains the interpretive and interpersonal processes through which individuals impose meaning and direction on their vocational behaviour” (p. 42). The theory entails three components, namely *vocational personality*, *career adaptability*, and *life themes*—the focus of narrative career counselling

Vocational Personality. The Theory of Career Construction includes trait-and-factor notions; however, it aims to augment them with the subjective experience of the individual. Savickas (2005) stated that the theory focused upon the “implementation of vocational self-concepts, thus providing a subjective, private, and idiographic perspective for comprehending *careers* to augment the objective, public, and nomothetic perspective for understanding *occupations*” (p.44). However, Savickas employs constructivist methodology through emphasis upon subjective implementation of self-concepts as distinct from the understanding oneself from the perspective of shared, public forms (i.e., traits). To be ascribed a code according to the RIASEC model (Holland, 1985) may provide an interesting perspective for objectively comparing and contrasting one individual against others or a source of information for objectively clustering occupations, however, it would say little about how an individual would actively engage in the process of meaningfully expressing his or her “type”.

Career Adaptability. Savickas (2005) defined career adaptability as “a psychosocial construct that denotes an individual’s readiness and resources for coping with current and imminent vocational development tasks, occupational transitions,

and personal traumas" (p. 49). Alternatively put, career adaptability subsumes the attitudes, competencies, and behaviours used by individuals to fit into work that suits them and can include repeated or sequences of decisions and behavioural approximations or testing of particular occupational settings or duties. Moreover, this process is toward the implementation of self-concept. Savickas emphasised that the Theory of Career Construction does not focus on the Person or the Environment, with respect to the P-E fit abbreviation, rather it focuses on the dash (-). This position indicates the theory's assumptions that the construction of a career is a psychosocial process through which self and society are synthesised. In this way occupational role should validate and individual's sense of self and facilitate social integration against a context of social expectations.

Life Themes. Savickas advanced the idea of life themes at the level of personal narrative and subjective career. He supported the notion of individuals taking a unique perspective and that counselling was about facilitating clients developing their own stories and subjective career.

Savickas positioned life stories as the crucial threads of continuity the made meaningful the elements of vocational personality and adaptability. As distinct from the personality traits, stories express the uniqueness of an individual; a story of one who is contextualised in time, place and role. Savickas specified that he conceptualised problems as preoccupations, either positive or negative, and that career construction is about the transformation of a personal problem. Career stories explain why an individual made choices and explicate the meanings that guided those choices. Career stories '"tell how the self of yesterday became the self of today and will become the self of tomorrow" (Savickas, 2005, p. 58). Savickas noted that stories do not determine the future. However, he asserted that stories play a role in the action of

an individual's career adaptation by evaluating resources, limitations and using traits and abilities to work through tasks, transitions, and trauma.

It is axiomatic that there are commonalities in stories and themes, and these may take various prototypical forms in society (e.g., myths, archetypes, imagoes). Savickas (2005) recognised this, however eschewed the idea that these stories can be objectified and catalogued, because to do so would risk the unique stories of each and every individual. Savickas pursued the agenda of uniqueness by contrasting personality types and life themes. He suggested that a personality type indicates an individual's resemblance and similarity and a prototypical other, whereas a story was a truly unique description of one person. Types indicate *what* a person possesses (e.g., abilities, interests) whereas themes indicate *why* these are important or matter to that person.

Summary

The STF provides a broad heuristic for the application of constructivist theory. From the constructivist theoretical view, the STF indicates that career is multifaceted and that the individual makes sense of the layers of interacting influences upon his or her career. Whilst the Theory of Career Construction suggests that objectively observable features of a person's career (e.g., vocational type) should be included in theoretical formulations, it emphasises the subjective experience of career and how individuals create thematic stories to account for his or her life and career. From a constructivist perspective, these two metatheoretical frameworks can subsume the tenets of narrative career counselling.

Theoretical Tenets of Narrative Career Counselling

Toward a definition

Career counselling—broadly understood—is a term that can be used to subsume a variety of diverse activities, derived from an equally diverse corpus of theories; for example, person-environment fit, person-centred, psychodynamic, developmental, social learning, social psychological, and computer-assisted (Subich & Simonson, 2001; Walsh & Osipow, 1990). Narrative career counselling exemplifies the constructivist approach to career. Yet despite the passage of more than two decades since its emergence, it would be inappropriate to make a claim on a precise definition of narrative career counselling because it remains a rapidly evolving collection of ideas and methods. Given its inherent diversity, career counselling takes on different forms and is variously defined, but the following will suffice as an organising concept:

> A largely *verbal process* in which a professional counselor and counselee(s) are in a *dynamic and collaborative relationship*, focused on identifying and acting on the counselees' goals, in which the counselor employs a repertoire of diverse techniques or processes, to help bring about *self-understanding*, understanding of the career *concerns* involved and behavioural options available, as well as informed decision making in the counselee, who has the responsibility for his or her own *actions* (Herr, Cramer, & Niles, 2004, p. 42) [our italics].

From the perspective of narrative career counselling, the key features of the aforementioned definition are "a largely verbal process", "collaborative relationship" and "self-understanding". The italicised text serves to emphasise the meaning-making processes inherent to the narrative approach to career counselling, its

contextualisation against the backdrop of a dynamic counselling relationship, and the emphasis upon the client's concerns and actions. Within this framework, narrative career counselling facilitates individuals' self-reflection and elaboration of self-concepts toward an enhanced self-understanding and personal meaning. This proposition highlights the essentially meaning-oriented work of narrative career counselling. Narrative career counselling can be conceived of as a counselling process in which the client is supported in creating a personal story (or stories) that holistically accounts for his or her life and career, and enables the person to make meaningfully informed career-decisions and actions.

Narrative: Meaning for living

As with humanistic counselling (Chen, 2001) and constructivist (personal) counselling (Mahoney, 2003), the pursuit of meaning is a crucial activity of narrative career counselling. An individual is confronted with a range of challenges in creating his or her career identity: (a) drawing upon personal feelings, (b) differentiating self from others, (c) developing a personal narrative, (d) representing experience in one's own terms, (e) focusing a point-of-view, (f) building an inner life, and, (g) relating all to one's own purpose (Law, Meijers, & Wijers, 2002). All of these challenges require subjective engagement with the world and it is personal narrative that provides subjective coherence for that engagement over a lifetime (Guichard, 2005). Personal narrative is the ever-evolving story a person uses to describe and understand his or her life. Meijers (1998) suggested that career identity was a "…structure or network of meanings in which the individual consciously links his [sic] own motivation, interests and competencies with acceptable career roles" (p. 200) and that this was constantly changing due to the individual's exposure to new learning experiences. The process toward meaning and identity is the objective and work of narrative career counselling

which aims to assist a person to develop and redevelop their personal narrative, especially in relation to career.

As with a literary story, the plots of a personal narrative bring coherence, structure, and a heuristic through which to understand a person's story. Though facts from a person's past and present are important in the narrative process (Chen, 1997), constructing a useful, meaningful career narrative is not simply a matter of recounting events; rather it is about connecting life events into a meaningful whole (Christensen & Johnston, 2003; Meijers, 1998; Reid, 2006b). A career narrative revealed (Brott, 2001, 2004) and analysed in counselling may seek to determine the characteristic signature, or plots, of a person's career over his or her life (Cochran, 1997; Ochberg, 1988; Savickas, 2005). Notwithstanding the historical work done in narrative career counselling, the process should also take into account a future orientation (Cochran, 1997), with an awareness of uncertainty and a need to compromise should life circumstance dictate (Chen, 1997, 2004) Such an approach allows the client to prepare for and make career-related decisions and actions that are consistent with his or her story.

McAdams (1996) proposed that an individual's life narrative could be evaluated using six standards of a "good life-story" (p. 315): *coherence*, *openness*, *credibility*, *differentiation*, *reconciliation,* and *generative integration.* Coherence refers to a story's internal veracity and of its making sense according to its own terms. Openness refers to flexibility for future possibilities and the leaving open of a number of potential story lines. Credibility is the balance between fact and fiction, empirical experience and narrative interpretation. Identity is constructed through narratives, however, that construction process must be based upon renderings of verifiable experience; that is "we construct representations of reality, but we do not construct

reality itself" (Savickas, 2005, p. 43). The notion of differentiation suggests that, over time, a person's story should become more complex and rich in detail and intricate facets. With this complexity comes contradiction and challenge. A sound story should involve the reconciliation of these sometimes competing threads and the acceptance of compromise when faced with a multiplicity of choice. As with story endings, generative integration refers to the process of bringing higher order meaning to a story as a life, or a phase of a life, approaches its termination.

Narrative career counselling is personal

In the counselling literature there is a distinction between counselling for personal issues and career issues. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to promulgate the argument that career counselling is necessarily a profoundly personal experience, there is a considerable body of literature which argues that the distinction between career counselling and personal counselling is inappropriate (e.g., Anderson & Niles, 1995; Betz & Corning, 1993; Bingham, 2002; D. Brown & Brooks, 1985; Imbibo, 1994; Krumboltz, 1993; Lewis, 2001; Manuele-Adkins, 1992; McMahon & Patton, 2002). The Systems Theory Framework for career (Patton & McMahon, 2006a) comprehensively indicates that career is much more than objectively described interests, knowledge and personality traits; the framework includes all of those issues traditionally seen as personal (e.g., sexuality, religion, values, and health) and tethers them to the uniquely personal experience of career. While presenting problems for counselling may be different with respect to phenomenology, diagnostic category, and treatment technique (e.g., a partner relationship problem or occupational problem), narrative career counselling does not operate on the assumption that so-called personal issues lie outside the range of what goes to make up a person's career. The narrative approach to career aims to construct a profound and comprehensively

meaningful account of a person's life and how his or her career is inherently part of a broader life story, rather than an isolated appendix cut off from the personal aspects.

Emotion

The theoretical body of orthodox career development has been criticised for its lack of inclusion of emotion (Kidd, 1998, 2004; Meijers, 2003). A scan through the index pages of major contemporary texts upholds this criticism by way of limited references to the topic of emotion (e.g., S. D. Brown & Lent, 2005). It is as if career is a completely cognitive and rational process. However, with respect to subjective career and identity there is a strong emphasis upon meaning in ways that parallel humanistic psychology's preponderance around meaning-making and emotion (Chen, 2001). This connection is not lost on emerging views of career and identity in which emotion is an intrinsic and explicit part of the process of narrative self-construction of career identity (Meijers, 1998, 2003; Young, Valach, & Collin, 2002). Furthermore, emotion has been demonstrated to play a key role in the narrative and conversations in which career is the content (Young et al., 2002). In narrative career counselling a client's feelings are brought into the frame of discussion and the affective characteristics of a story are neither emphasized nor diminished; feelings are positioned within the story itself and are used as indicators of the story's truthfulness for the person.

Action

Despite its orientation to language and speech, a narrative approach to career does not eschew individual action and agency in context (Christensen & Johnston, 2003; Reid, 2006b; Young et al., 2002), especially because of the need for active engagement in a learning environment for the development of career identity (Meijers, 1998). The process of career decision-making involves the development of

a narrative—ideal and optional—that can steer a person productively into his or her future (Cochran, 1997); hence narrative has an interdependent relationship with action. A person's narrative contributes to career-related decision-making and makes his or her goal-directed action meaningful (Young & Valach, 2004). In this way, narrative takes on an adaptive function, which may be compared to the construct of *career adaptability* mooted by Savickas (1997; 2005). The work of narrative career counselling involves engaging in a person's story and developing the story so that it may inform his or her career-decisions and career-related actions and contribute to a person's adaptation to circumstances.

The coalition of assessment and intervention

Qualitative assessment for career counselling is predominantly based upon constructivism (McMahon & Patton, 2002; McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2003; Whiston & Rahardja, 2005). An important feature of the narrative approach is that its assessment procedures on the whole are qualitative, as distinct from traditional quantitative psychometrics. Moreover, the distinction between assessment and intervention blurs within the constructivisms and narrative frameworks because the process of career assessment tends to be intrinsic to the process of counselling (Mahoney, 2003; Patton & McMahon, 2006b; Schultheiss, 2005). In this way, assessment is not simply eliciting facts from the client and measuring vocational attributes (e.g., interests). Assessment is an explorative process through which the client reflectively describes his or her life. This reflective process serves to both facilitate a client and counsellor establishing idiographic details and, moreover, to engage in the process of knitting the facts together into a career story that is truthful for the client, yet makes reasonable sense according to the characteristics of a good story (cf., McAdams, 1996). This is best exemplified by the integration of qualitative

assessment procedures within the counselling process (McMahon & Patton, 2002; McMahon et al., 2003; Savickas, 1992; Whiston & Rahardja, 2005) such as semi-structured interviews that flow with the counselling dialogue (e.g., McIlveen, McGregor-Bayne, Alcock, & Hjertum, 2003).

Co-constructed meaning

The relationship between client and counsellor is paramount in constructivist counselling (Mahoney, 2003). Narrative career counselling entails a meaning-making process through which the client creates his or her life story with the assistance of a co-creator—the counsellor (Bujold, 2004; A. Collin & Young, 1986; McMahon, 2006; Peavy, 2000a; Reid, 2005). In other words:

> Acting as co-authors and editors of these narratives, counsellors can help clients (1) authorise their careers by narrating a coherent, continuous, and credible story, (2) invest career with meaning by identifying themes and tensions in the story line, and (3) learn the skills needed to perform the next episode in the story (Savickas, 1993, p. 213).

The active presence of the counsellor, through his or her co-author or editor role, is the hallmark of narrative career counselling. This at once dismisses any notions of objectivity in the assessment and counselling process. This does not imply the transgression of boundaries in an ethical sense. It simply asserts that the counsellor and client are in the co-constructive process together and that there is no use in pretending otherwise. The client and counsellor are together in a unique system in which their two narrative worlds coalesce, albeit temporarily (McMahon & Patton, 2006a; Patton & McMahon, 1999). This requires the counsellor to be critically aware of his or her own system of influences and how the influences play out in the counselling process and dialogue (Reid, 2006b). In a literary sense, the counsellor

plays the role of a caring editor for the client who plays the role of the author. This analogy highlights the collaborative relationship, but gives emphasis to the primary author of the career story—the client.

Summary

The core features of the theory underpinning narrative career counselling presented here include:

(a) The fundamental idea that narrative career counselling serves the development of meaning;

(b) It is a profoundly personal process;

(c) It is based in emotion and action (not simply thought);

(d) Assessment and intervention are intertwined processes; and,

(e) That the client and counsellor work together collaboratively toward the construction of meaning.

The following section introduces two metatheoretical frameworks that serve to articulate constructivism and a narrative career counselling. In addition a range of narrative career counselling procedures that are purported to operationalise the aforementioned theoretical features of the narrative approach are presented.

Exemplars of Narrative Career Counselling

There is a significant range of other approaches and techniques that could be useful in the process of narrative career counselling (e.g., Cochran, 1997; McMahon & Patton, 2003 ; 2006b). Only a sample of narrative procedures is presented and those that are highlighted are typically qualitative and idiographic. They can be grouped according to being primarily spoken or written in process or whether the client-counsellor dialogue—an inherent feature of narrative career counselling—is extended through visual or spatial procedures.

Spoken and written forms. Spoken techniques include career counselling for Life Themes (Savickas, 2005), Sociodynamic Counselling (Peavy, 2000b), the Storied Approach (Brott, 2001), the Thematic Extrapolation Method (Super, 1957), the Career Style Interview (Savickas, 1989b, 2005), the Life/Work Design approach (Campbell & Ungar, 2004), and the Career Systems Interview (McIlveen et al., 2003). Written exercises, such as autobiographies (Christensen & Johnston, 2003; Cochran, 1997; McIlveen, Ford, & Dun, 2005), add to the depth of the counselling dialogue and provide clients with a different modality of expression. The use of metaphor also operates as a vehicle for generating meaning (Meijers, 2003; Mignot, 2004).

Visual and spatial forms. It would be inaccurate, or at lease delimiting, to assume that all narrative techniques necessarily require a primarily spoken process (Reid, 2006b) or assume literary or poetic structure. Some of the significant visual and spatial techniques that can contribute to a narrative approach include life-lines, life roles circles, card sorts, and goal map (Brott, 2004); construct laddering, family constellation, and guided fantasy (Cochran, 1997); the Career-o-Gram (Thorngren & Feit, 2001); collage (Adams, 2003); and the My System of Career Influences reflection activity (McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2005).

In addition to the forms mentioned above, a further sample was selected for a more detailed overview and presentation, primarily because they exemplify two predominant sources of theory for narrative career counselling—the Theory of Career Construction (Savickas, 2002, 2005) and the Systems Theory Framework (Patton & McMahon, 2006a).

Thematic-Extrapolation Method

Whilst the life-span life-space theory of career (Super, 1957, 1980, 1992) is not of the constructivist ilk, it is worth noting. Super (1957) portended the emergence

of narrative assessment techniques in his formulation of the Thematic-Extrapolation Method (TEM). In his 1957 work, Super shied away from advancing this model in deference to the actuarial, quantitative methods; which is not surprising given the omnipresence and dominance of traditional paradigms at that time. The TEM entailed the collection of an individual's history and details according to the various factors of Super's model and then extrapolating from the biographical data any patterns or trends that would enable prediction of the future, and ultimately assist in the process of career decision-making. Inherently qualitative, the method was nevertheless informed by empirical tradition. Though the TEM was never fully promulgated by Super, it later received a modicum of interest within the career development literature (Jepsen, 1994). The TEM is noteworthy because it provides an historical lineage for narrative career assessment processes and because the method itself, its theory, and its creator, Don Super, had a significant impact upon the work of Mark Savickas (A Collin, 2001), who is a significant protagonist for the constructivist paradigm in vocational psychology.

Life Theme Career Counselling

Savickas' (Savickas, 2002; 2005) Theory of Career Construction posited life themes as a crucial element to be addressed by the theory of career development and practice of career counselling. In this way personal narrative plays a pivotal role in the construction of career identity.

> In telling their career stories about their work experiences, individuals selectively highlight particular experiences to produce a narrative truth by which they live. Counsellors who use career construction theory listen to clients' narratives for the story lines of vocational personality, career adaptability, and life themes (Savickas, 2005, p. 43).

A person's narrative is not a simple and isolated entity. It is also socially mediated and inhered with the discourses of an individual's context. In addition, Savickas clearly positions the counsellor in the mix of the construction of meaning (cf., Brott, 2001).

Quite early in the emergence of constructivisms in the literature of career development, Savickas (1992) posited the value of autobiographical methods, recollections, structured interviews, and card sorts as means of facilitating clients' understanding of their life themes through the process of career counselling. His life-theme counselling model was presented as a process for dealing with career indecision and involved application of the Career Style Interview (Savickas, 1989b, 1995, 2004, 2005). This procedure entailed:

(a) Collecting stories from the client to as to reveal a life theme;

(b) The counsellor narrating back to the client the life theme;

(c) A discussion of the meaning of the client's presenting problem (i.e., career indecision) in context of the revealed life theme;

(d) Extension of the life theme into the future and extrapolation of it toward interests and occupations that correlate with the theme;

(e) Rehearsal of the behaviours necessary for the specification; and implementation of a career choice.

Savickas' approach is perhaps the most simple and elegant form of narrative career counselling. It is devoid of a technical apparatus and embedded in a gentle and client-centred conversation. Some of the questions used by Savickas in this interview process and the Career Style Interview (Savickas, 1989b, 2004), include: Who do you admire? Who would you like to pattern your life after? Do you have a favourite saying or motto? The key to this process is the identification of a plot (cf.,Cochran,

1997; Ochberg, 1988) within the story and theme of a client's presentation. Savickas suggested that the elicitation of life themes required the counsellor to attentively listen for a history of deviations, trouble, or imbalance that inhere unique qualities to an individual's history, and moreover, how the individual has taken those experiences to form identity. The counsellor then listens for how the client has used these experiences to make sense of his or her life and move forward. In this way, the interview is the primary vehicle for the revelation and construction of narrative and life themes (Savickas, 2002).

The Storied Approach

Brott's (2001) Storied Approach to career counselling was founded upon the proposition that a person's identity is bound up in his or her life story which inherently speaks of career. Its constructivist theoretical foundations are aligned with the life themes and developmental features of the Theory of Career Construction (Savickas, 2002, 2005).

This process of the Storied Approach involves *co-construction*, *deconstruction*, and *construction*, that is, respectively, to reveal, unpack, and then re-author (Brott, 2001, 2004). This essentially entails a dynamic and intrinsically interwoven interchange between client and counsellor through which information is combined to form a story for the client. During co-construction the counsellor and client reveal the stories from the past and present. Deconstruction involves unpacking stories and seeking differing perspectives. Taking different perspectives is a process strongly emphasised by Chen (1997), who purported that it embeds the client's story in context, encourages flexibility, and produces distinctive meaning that enhances potential and aspiration. The re-authoring phase involves the construction of new stories; which is a process throughout which the counsellor supports and poses

questions to draw the story into the broader elements of the client's life. In addition to the interview process, Brott endorses the use of qualitative and quantitative assessment procedures (e.g., card sorts and psychometric interest inventories) but emphasises that their use is for the construction of meaning rather than vocational diagnosis.

Career Systems Interview

The Systems Theory Framework (McMahon & Patton, 2006a) offers a theoretical safeguard to ensure that career counselling process is holistic. The Career Systems Interview (McIlveen et al., 2003) is based upon the STF. It has been compared with other semi-structured interviews which take an holistic view of career (Schultheiss, 2005) and apply the STF (McMahon & Watson, 2006). It entails a process in which the counsellor facilitates a free-flowing discussion with the client. The stimuli for discussion are the influences presented within the STF. Following an initial discussion to ascertain the presenting problem for career counselling, each STF influence (e.g., self-concept, values, culture, family, and interests) is discussed with reference to the client's understanding of its presence within his or her career. Moreover, there is a discussion of how the client understands the interaction between influences in his or her life.

Administratively, there is no particular order of discussion, as the interview tends to follow the client's own direction in dialogue and moves seamlessly across the STF influences. The conversation is prefaced by the counsellor suggesting that discovering a career direction or making a career decision is so important that a lot of personal aspects need to be taken into account; as opposed to making a decision based upon interests alone. Anecdotes are provided to support this rationale. For example, having strong mathematical ability does not necessarily indicate taking a major in

physics or accounting at university. Furthermore, there are no set or specific questions for the procedure. Emphasis is placed upon the experience being a relaxed conversation in which the client feels in control and in a space in which he or she can explore and speak his or her mind, rather than following a specific procedural path. An aim of the process is to create a space in which the client can hear his or her own voice openly talking about career, perhaps for the first time. Formal interpretation of themes by the counsellor is not hurried, as the process aims to allow sufficient flow of dialogue so that the client arrives at his or her own interpretation and themes. Should formal interpretation take place, it follows a process akin to that used in Life Theme Counselling (Savickas, 1992, 1995) and the Storied Approach (Brott, 2001).

The Career Systems Interview may be followed by psychometric testing, career education activities, further elaborative interviews, or other specific narrative assessment and counselling techniques. For example, a written alternative to the Career Systems Interview has been specifically designed for this follow-up work. The booklet My Career Chapter (McIlveen, 2006; McIlveen et al., 2005) facilitates a client writing an autobiographical account of his or her career. As with the Career Systems Interview, the My Career Chapter activity requires clients to write about the myriad influences posited by the Systems Theory Framework (Patton & McMahon, 2006a). The client and counsellor engage in a shared reading of the story which resulted from completing the procedure and interpretation of the narrative ensues. Although group administration of the booklet is possible, the follow-up interpretive process lends itself to one-on-one counselling.

My System of Career Influences (MSCI)

The assessment technique My System of Career Influences (MSCI) reflection activity (McMahon, Patton et al., 2005) provides a broad systemic assessment of a

person's career and involves clients drawing the influences of their career against the layers of their system of influences according to the Systems Theory Framework (McMahon & Patton, 2006a). As with My Career Chapter, the MSCI is presented in a booklet format. A client would initially complete a range of exploratory questions regarding his or her present career situation. Like the visual and spatial features of the Career-o-Gram (Thorngren & Feit, 2001) and life roles circles (Brott, 2004), the MSCI entails the drawing of images and connecting themes into a meaningful whole. A clients depicts significant career influences in ever increasing spheres ranging from unique personal influences (e.g., values), to interpersonal influences (e.g., parents), to social and environmental influences (e.g., employment market). The client then reflects on the influences using past, present and future perspectives. The procedure finishes with a further set of reflective questions and action plans. The MSCI is suitable for group and individual administration; although group administration, without individual follow-up counselling, would likely diminish its utility for the development of an individual's narrative in detail. The technique has also been used in cross-cultural settings comparing its application with Australian and South African students (McMahon & Watson, 2006).

Discussion

In summary, narrative career counselling is a meaningful, emotional, action-oriented, personal approach to career counselling in which client and counsellor collaborate to review and create career stories in order to inform career-decisions and actions. It eschews traditional models of career counselling which have been based upon the expert power of the counsellor as a vocational diagnostician and purveyor of career-related information.

With the exception of the My System of Career Influences (McMahon, Patton et al., 2005) with its graphical dimensions, the narrative techniques exemplified in this paper are primarily verbal in content and process; they entail extensive conversations and writing tasks. Conversation and writing are significant vehicles of exploration that essentially aim to construct themes for the client's self-understanding. Themes are evoked by, and are present within, the narrative of the client in a forward-feed cyclical process—a chapter begets another chapter of a life.

The terms narrative, story, and plot may well connote literary impressions, however, a meaningful narrative is not a work of literary fiction. These appropriated terms are metaphors for the work of narrative career counselling and the construction of meaning by a person. Some practitioners have creatively used elements and analogies from English literature (e.g., the case of Elaine; Savickas, 2005). This approach neither castes narrative career counselling as an endeavour to bring pre-existing stories to the life of an individual, nor does it demand that career counselling should take on the characteristics of creative story telling or essay writing that is full of flowery plot lines and intriguing characters; some life stories are subjectively and objectively humdrum and mundane, and quite satisfactorily so for the client!

Limitations and future directions

Despite the emergence of narrative career counselling as a promising alternative career development intervention, its relatively recent emergence is problematic for its articulation in the field. Reid (2005) provided a useful summary of narrative career counselling by way of enumerating the possible limitations and potential benefits. A significant point articulated by Reid was that the approach may be difficult for beginner practitioners because of its ostensible lack of structured techniques and tangible products (e.g., psychometric inventories) typically associated

with traditional approaches. Conversely, Reid suggested that it may suffer from rejection by advanced practitioners who have been schooled in the orthodox approaches, because of its lack of association with logical-positivist psychological science. Unlike the traditional approach, which over the course of decades has accumulated a substantial body of evidence for its efficacy and effectiveness (e.g., Swanson, 1995; Swanson & Gore, 2000), narrative career counselling has not yet accumulated a quantum of irrefutable evidence.

Epistemological differences aside, and notwithstanding emerging quasi-experimental evidence (e.g., McIlveen et al., 2005; McIlveen et al., 2003) and rigorous qualitative validation studies (e.g., McMahon, Watson, & Patton, 2005), Reid's (2005) critique is of fundamental importance. It would be disingenuous for the narrative school to use its repudiation of the logical-positivist paradigm as a veil for not engaging in its own rigorous evaluation upon its own epistemological terms; especially given the accession of qualitative research methods in counselling psychology (Morrow, 2005; Ponterotto, 2005). A failure by proponents of the narrative school to rigorously demonstrate its efficacy and effectiveness (cf., Chambless & Hollon, 1998) would likely attenuate the realisation of their aspiration for wider its articulation in the field of counselling psychology. There has, nevertheless, been an important methodological advance in the form of a set of criteria for the rigorous development of constructivist, qualitative assessment procedures (McMahon et al., 2003), and these certainly are apropos of the narrative approach.

Notwithstanding the claims and progress of the narrative approach to career counselling, there has been only limited development of the theory of narrative process and its relationship to identity and career, and additionally, the construction of

narratives within the counselling experience. However this inadequacy is not surprising given that the research into the process of career counselling, in general, is yet to be fully realised (Heppner & Heppner, 2003; Swanson, 1995). What is needed, is theory that fully describes the *how* processes of developing a career-related narrative and its co-construction in the context of career counselling. The Systems Theory Framework and Theory of Career Construction were offered as promising theoretical vehicles for investigating and developing narrative career counselling.

Intriguing potential research question emanate from the two theoretical positions. For example, in the absence of a meaningful dialogue between counsellor and client, none of the techniques presented in this paper would stand as an independent process that would enable a client to generate useful narrative and meaning (an assertion that should equally hold true for classical psychometrics nevertheless). As with co-construction of life themes (Savickas, 2005) and the coalescence of respective systems of influences of the counsellor and client in the STF, the literature of narrative career counselling may be further articulated in terms of the conversational processes of the counselling relationship and the client's narrative and their identity. Both theoretical frameworks lend themselves to the counselling process question: how are career stories constructed in the counselling dialogue?

Furthermore, there is a need to build upon the extant guidelines for qualitative assessment and counselling procedures (McMahon & Patton, 2002; McMahon et al., 2003) and develop theory that explicitly informs the development and evaluation of new narrative career counselling procedures. Finally, given the relative lack of Australian psychological literature, and presumably a concomitant limitation on

expertise, there is scope to consider how narrative career counselling can be learned by practitioners who seek an alternative to the well-established traditional models.

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